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**In Hong Kong, Expat Children with Special Needs Have
Trouble Finding Schools**

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Report

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, Expat Children with Special Needs Have Trouble Finding Schools

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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When relocating to Hong Kong, expat families endure the timely and costly process of finding appropriate schooling options for their children. The process is even more difficult for families with special needs children. All schooling options have limited seats and long waiting lists, and expat children with special needs spend years waiting for a spot in any school. This report delves into the lack of help provided for these children and how the expat community is taking matters into their own hands.

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Trisha Tran didn't think she was going to wait so long for her daughter to be enrolled in a school in Hong Kong.

An expatriate and a mother to a 6-year-old daughter with special educational needs, Tran has experienced the same frustrations other expat parents face when finding places for special needs children who aren't fluent in either Mandarin or Cantonese. She also has a 9-year-old son.

"No matter where you go in the world, there are SEN cases everywhere," Tran said. "Non-SEN children, regardless of ethnicity, have a genuine choice between a public or private school, with instruction available in Chinese and or English in Hong Kong...SEN children do not."

Tran struggled to enroll her children in a suitable school. She spent days searching and enrolling her older son in an international school, but she had little luck in finding a school for her daughter. Tran declined to specify the learning disability her daughter has.

"English is an official language in Hong Kong. These kids should have access to English education whatever age they come here," Tran said. "It was already hard work to get my older son to where he is now, but for my younger daughter, it's an even bigger burden to go to another school and learn another language."

She spent months trying to enroll her younger daughter in an appropriate school and reached countless dead ends. Today, her daughter is attending a training center that's not an accredited school, and Tran is still looking.

Tran's experience led her to file a petition to the Hong Kong Education Bureau in June 2014. "After my petition, other parents came out of the woodwork. I was surprised

that so many other parents also had a hard time searching for resources and wanted to complain to the government about not having the schooling options available for our children. I thought I was the only one,” Tran said.

Hong Kong provides little help for expat children with special needs. Relocation services are usually the first to offer support by providing educational packets, helping with school searches and arranging private school visits. Other than that, parents are alone as they search for an appropriate school. The process is difficult, timely and costly. All schooling options available for expatriates have a limited amount of seats for special needs children. Most, if not all, of the schools are full and have long waiting lists.

The process becomes more difficult if a family has a special needs child who speaks no Chinese. Expatriates have an advantage if they hold a valid visa and a Hong Kong identity card, which qualifies their child to enroll in Hong Kong’s mainstream school system. Even then, there is a difference between local primary and local secondary schools. Classes in local primary schools are only taught in Chinese, while Hong Kong’s secondary school system teaches in both Chinese and English. Depending on a child’s age, an expatriate coming to Hong Kong with a special needs child can receive different benefits.

The frustrating process is a story that’s been told over and over. Parents take months, even years, to search for schools, and they are regularly declined because the few special needs seats for expat children are full. Reaching dead end after dead end, parents still are waiting, patiently, for a seat for their special needs children. “There are parents

that have been waiting for five, seven, and even nine years for an opening in these schools,” Tran said.

Limited places and long waiting lists have caused uproar in the Hong Kong expatriate community. Tran formed a group of concerned parents, and the group has filed complaints to the Equal Opportunities Commission for months, their latest at the beginning of 2015, advocating “for more affordable English-medium options to be provided to students from different ethnic backgrounds.”

The seemingly working educational system provides extensively for local citizens and elite expatriates, but has not supported middle class expatriates who bring special needs children to Hong Kong.

Relocating

Hiring a relocation service is a way expatriates can find relief and have a smooth transition when they move to Hong Kong. These services assist expatriates in areas of planning, living and working.

With over 265 offices worldwide, Crown Relocations is a domestic and international relocation company that considers itself as “international removalists that will make your move easier” and is the world’s largest privately-owned moving company.

Crown Relocations emphasizes that education for children is a priority when helping expatriates adjust to their new life in Hong Kong. Online, the company offers an educational packet to parents searching for education options for their children.

The relocation service's thick educational packet covers every aspect of education in Hong Kong, but there is a niche that's missing: education for special needs children. In their 47-page Hong Kong Educational Guide for 2013-14, Crown Relocations introduces schooling options, expenses, school holidays and a page with a description and map of each international school in Hong Kong. However, the packet has one page on special needs education containing a brief introduction to special education and a short list of special needs organizations.

A company spokesperson said that Crown would offer recommendations and advice. Otherwise, expatriates have to use that one sheet to contact and apply to educational organizations themselves.

Other relocation services offer recommendations to special needs centers around Hong Kong, but don't connect parents to the centers. MSI Mobility, another relocation firm, identifies local resources for special needs education, and Sterling Relocation provides advice on alternative options for families with special needs children.

Limited seats

Expatriates with special needs children have five schooling options – mainstream schools, international schools, schools within the English Schools Foundation system and private independent schools. English Schools Foundation schools are a holdover from British colonial days and conduct classes primarily in English. All of them have just a few places for special needs children with autism, dyslexia or other disabilities.

A parent must hold both a valid visa and a Hong Kong identity card if they want to enroll their child into the mainstream school system.

According to a table completed in response to a legislator's request, Marian Lai, the permanent secretary of education, indicated that 36,190 special needs students studied in a mainstream primary and secondary schools in 2014-15.

As of September 2014, there were 60 mainstream special schools in Hong Kong, according to the Education Bureau. Special schools differ by offering separate classes for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical disability, intellectual disability and social developmental issues. Since the 2008-09 school year, all primary and secondary classes in these special schools are offered at no-cost for those who qualify.

Lai tabulated the estimated number of classes and students in different types of special schools in the 2014-15 school year. According to the data, an estimated number of 7,643 special needs students attended special schools in Hong Kong that year.

Although there are a large number of mainstream special schools in Hong Kong, the international school system has many fewer places. "Hong Kong operates a vibrant international school sector with a total of 51 international schools operating different curricula," according to the Education Opportunities Information Sheet provided by the Education Bureau. "They are the primary service providers of international education services and have traditionally been meeting the demand from [non-Chinese speaking] students and foreign nationals, most of whom would eventually return to their home countries for education."

Not all international schools provide support for special needs children, but there are a few schools, such as Harbour School, that provide extensive programs for children with mild to moderate levels of special educational needs.

From 2013 to 2015, Hong Kong's Education Bureau has seen an increasing capacity of students at international schools, but the number of special needs seats hasn't risen at the same rate.

"Places in [international] schools in the 2014-15 school year have been increased by around 800 at primary level and 280 at secondary level when compared to the 2013-14 school year," Lai wrote in another legislative response.

"In the 2014-15 school year, there are around 470 primary students and 420 secondary students with SEN studying in international schools. The corresponding numbers for the 2013/14 school year are around 400 and 330 respectively," she wrote.

Besides special needs seats in mainstream and international schools, the English Schools Foundation system also offers seats for children with special needs. The system, founded by a government ordinance, adheres to the British curriculum and is less expensive than international schools. The system provides education for children with mild special learning needs in all of its 21 schools and operates one special school, called the Jockey Club Sarah Roe School, with 70 places for special needs children.

"The school is the only special school in Hong Kong that uses English as the medium of instruction for students with severe learning difficulties and complex learning needs," said Johnny Tam, the communication officer of the English Schools Foundation.

According to an article written by Jeff Li in *China Daily*, the Jockey Club Sarah Roe School's operator has had over 100 students express interest in enrolling by March this year. Students had to be turned down, and the school's principal said that it was "heart-breaking" to have to turn away students.

“You want to do everything for all the students who have these needs, but you can’t. Not because you don’t want to, but because of the limitations,” Karin Wetsalaar, the school’s principal, said.

According to a response to a legislative request, Lai wrote that 392 primary and secondary special needs students studied in the English Schools Foundation system in the 2014-15 academic year.

Tran found that 315 children are currently on the waiting list for primary and secondary schooling in the English Schools Foundation system. For the Jockey Club Sarah Roe School, there are 91 children on the waiting list for primary and secondary schooling. “At the current rate of increase, it would take the [Education Bureau] about seven years to clear the waiting list [for the English Schools Foundation system] – a clear obstacle for children [with special needs] to access appropriate education,” Tran said in a presentation to the Equal Opportunities Commission.

The last and most expensive schooling option is a private independent school. There are 292 special needs students in 2014-15 in this option, according to Lai’s response.

Wealthier expatriates can afford education for their special needs children in private independent schools, which also have limited seats for special needs children. The last educational option is home schooling. Because of high costs, middle class expatriates do not have that option available to them.

The government is (not) here to help

When Tran began her search for her children's education, she did not know where to start. "The government was not very informative, and I had no idea what my resources were. The only help any one would have gotten was through a word-of-mouth from other expatriates, and to me, it was very limiting."

The Education Bureau's online homepage would be one of the first places a parent would look for schooling options for their children. The Web page is a portal filled with information about each school option available for children. Under "School Information," there is a link and an information sheet for children who aren't fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese, but there is no link for special needs children.

The link brings viewers to a Web page called "Education services for non-Chinese speaking students." The first sentence of the page says "the [Education Bureau] is committed to assisting all non-Chinese speaking students in adapting to the local education system and integrating into the community as early as possible."

Clicking through every link in that page – even the "Summary of Support Services for NCS students" - there is no mention of special educational services for non-Chinese speaking students with special needs.

The information sheet from the Education Bureau details all the educational opportunities for non-Chinese speaking children in Hong Kong. Non-Chinese speaking children with special educational needs are mentioned in the section under "Students with Special Educational Needs". The section states that "all eligible children with special

educational needs have the right to enjoy equal opportunity to receiving education in public sector schools in Hong Kong.”

The page provides the name of two special education centers that may help with referrals for special school placement services. A link on that page describes only one service, the Special Education Resource Center.

In 1996, the Education Bureau set up the center after the Board of Education published a report seeking “to establish a resource center for special education teachers to generate a database and network for communication among all special education teachers and special education personnel as well.”

The resource is directed to special education teachers, not expat parents.

“Our center serves as a hub for disseminating information regarding support measures for students with special educational needs. The center ... [operates] in the mode of a physical library and a web-based information hub ... We do not offer direct services for processing cases applying for studying in Hong Kong from other countries,” Arthur S. K. Choy, a spokesperson from the Education Bureau’s Special Education Resource Centre, said.

Although the center does not offer “direct services” for aiding parents with finding an appropriate school for their children, the center’s website is filled with pamphlets that can direct parents to educational organizations and resource centers around Hong Kong for specific types of learning or behavioral disorders.

“In Hong Kong, all eligible children, irrespective of their ethnic origin and physical or intellectual ability, have equal right and access to basic education. It is the

Government's prevailing policy to accommodate the needs of all eligible students, including [non-Chinese speaking] students with SEN, in both mainstream and special public-sector schools," Leonie Lee, the secretary of education, wrote to Concerned Parents and Friends of SEN Children.

"We ensure that there are sufficient school places in mainstream and special public-sector schools to cater for all eligible children, including NCS students with SEN and provide appropriate support services for them," Lee wrote later in the response.

The Immigration Department of the Hong Kong government might also be used as a resource and can provide some reference points when it comes to these new incoming families with special needs children. Parents must inquire through the department's online contact form to acquire further information on options that are available to them. However, the department mainly links expatriates back to the Education Bureau.

Benefits differ between primary and secondary schools

Middle class expatriates who come into Hong Kong with primary school-aged special needs children want to have the financial benefit of enrolling their children into a no-cost mainstream special school, but mainstream primary special schools only instruct in Chinese.

"The primary school years are the most difficult for NCS(non-Chinese speaking) SEN(special educational needs) students to gain access to EMI(English-medium instruction) schools...Expat NCS SEN students face long waiting lists in the international

school sector for SEN supported places,” Tran wrote in her presentation to the Equal Opportunities Commission, “And, local NCS SEN students are left with access only to public sector primary schools, which they do not benefit from.”

Middle class expatriates who come into Hong Kong with secondary school-aged children have a difficult time as well. Mainstream secondary special schools instruct both in Chinese and English, but special needs children already find it difficult to learn one language.

“The secondary school years remain difficult for expat NCS SEN students to find suitable SEN places, but easier for local NCS SEN students to access a EMI classroom,” Tran wrote.

Translation service can be provided to non-Chinese speaking students when they are in primary school, but the translation comes in the form of speech, not writing. “Forms and exams in primary school are still in Chinese and because of that, NCS students will have a hard time completing these written items. This is highly unreasonable; students cannot accurately follow the curriculum,” Tran said.

“To ask NCS SEN students to adopt to a ... classroom, when a typical NCS student struggles in a [Chinese medium instruction] classroom, on top of their developmental delays would be compromising to their overall progress,” Tran said.

Tran demonstrated this in her findings when she examined the dropout rate for special needs students in public sector schools for 2013-14 school year.

“The drop-off rate for NCS SEN students in public sector schools is 57 percent, significantly higher than the 5 percent drop out rate for all SEN students. ... NCS SEN

students are unable to transition from public primary to public secondary schools,” according to Tran’s finding. “For SEN students with speech and language impairment, the drop rate of 89 percent is even higher, suggesting that language is a significant factor for SEN students to make academic progress.”

Locals help locals, and expatriates have to fend for themselves

Yearly, the Hong Kong government funds local charitable organizations that support the local special needs community, but it has not taken the initiative to encourage helping expatriates who move into Hong Kong with special needs children.

Heep Hong Society is a local nonprofit that tries to look out for special needs children.

“Heep Hong was founded in 1963 when a group of enthusiastic women were concerned with the lack of postoperative care for children recovering from poliomyelitis and began to take them out of recreational activities. Over the years, poliomyelitis almost vanished in the territory. The Society thus expanded its services to accept children with different kinds of disabilities, including the physical and mentally challenged,” said Vivien Lee, the corporate development officer of the society.

The society provides therapies and training services at their care centers and delivers support services to primary and secondary schools, which tie in with the government’s policy on implementing integrated education in schools.

Every year, close to 4,000 families with special needs children enjoy a wide range of service from the five Parents Resource Centers in the society, according to Heep

Hong's 2013-14 annual report. With over 30 service units, the society says that it aims to provide help for any one in Hong Kong with a special needs child.

The society does not have a special section for expatriates with special needs children. To get help from this society, a parent has to apply to their Supportive Learning Services. The society offers bilingual services, but it focuses primarily on local residents.

According to Heep Hong Society's 2013-14 annual report, the organization received HK\$206.7 million in funding from the Hong Kong government. This amount is an increase from the previous year, when the organization received HK\$199.2 million in funding.

Out of the organization's expenditure, HK\$103 million was spent on special childcare centers, which allocates 33.6 percent and is the highest spent out of anything else, while the next highest amount, HK\$72.7 million, was spent on professional services, special projects and others. In total, the organization spent HK\$305.8 million from 2013-14.

Private organizations try to help out

Private special educational organizations are usually created by "expatriates who discovered there was nowhere for them to find support and education for their child," according to Crown Relocation's Hong Kong 2013-14 Education Guide. These organizations help expatriate families adjust to Hong Kong's culture and direct them to resources.

The Springboard Project is a privately-funded educational organization for special needs children who began from a community of non-Cantonese speaking families who had a difficulty finding English-speaking services. In 20 years, the center has developed into a non-profit charitable organization providing English-speaking special educational services that caters to students with a variety of mild to moderate learning difficulties, including Down syndrome, autism and developmental delays.

“The number of students we serve is relatively small. However services and programs for special needs students are quite expensive and especially intensive,” said Cordelia Au, a coordinator at the Springboard Project.

The organization operates both primary and middle school classes at the Korean International School.

According to the Springboard Project 2012-13 annual report, the organization spent HK\$1,464,112, spending the most on advertising and publicity expenses, which allotted to HK\$626,000. Income-wise, the organization brought in HK\$1,408,701, earning the most from its service fee income, which totaled to HK\$845,300.

Yearly, the funding from the government to Heep Hong Society is growing and lets the society have better outreach for local residents. The Springboard Project, however, is privately funded, and its funding comes from program fees and community support through direct donations or charity fundraising events.

According to the organization’s website, “Springboard needs to raise approximately HK\$400-500,000 annually to keep our services running and to provide

additional therapies and life skills training to the students and young adults with special educational needs that we serve.”

Heep Hong is seen as a valuable resource and community center for locals with special needs children, but the same cannot be said about the Springboard Project. The Springboard Project’s funding only allows the organization to have a small curriculum and serve a handful of students.

There are other private organizations and services that try to help expatriate parents of non-Chinese speaking children with special needs, such as the Autism Partnership, the Children’s Institute of Hong Kong, Autism Recovery Network, and the Rainbow Project.

Fighting for disability equality

Last September, Southern District Councilor Paul Zimmerman disclosed that 2,659 non-Chinese speaking students under the age of 15 need special help at school because they have some physical or mental disability.

Out of the 36,190 special needs students in mainstream primary and secondary schools, 349 of those students were considered as non-Chinese speaking, special needs students, according to another response by Lai to a legislative request.

Simon Ng, the senior program director in law at the University of Hong Kong, researches disability equality and inclusive education in Hong Kong. Dr. Ng also started and runs SEN Rights, a charitable nongovernmental organization that advocates for the cause.

Founded in July 2013, SEN Rights is “dedicated to promoting equal rights of persons with special educational needs and disabilities to quality education ... and advancing the spirit and implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” Hong Kong is a member of the United Nations.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ purpose is “to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity,” according to its website.

In Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the convention campaigns five items that countries in the U.N. should ensure of persons with disabilities. Those five items, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, include: including persons of disabilities into the general education system, providing access to an inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education, accommodating each individual’s requirement, receiving the support required ... to facilitate effective education, and providing effective individualized support measures ... in environments that maximize academic and social development.

“The Hong Kong government does not have a comprehensive policy regarding children with SEN from expat families. But according to the Equal Opportunities Commission, the government is looking into the matter,” Ng said.

The Equal Opportunities Commission is a “statutory body set up in 1996 to implement the Sex Discrimination Ordinance, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, the Family Status Discrimination Ordinance and the Race Discrimination Ordinance.”

In a press release, the Equal Opportunities Commission said that it would continue to relay the views of parents’ groups to the Education Bureau to ensure that special needs children can enjoy equal educational opportunities.

Repeat complaints and possibly, a light at the end of the tunnel

With the number of expatriates coming into Hong Kong, there will be a few that will come in with a child that needs to have special education. To accommodate this particular diversity of expatriates, the government would have to implement and further publicize the resource centers and educational organizations that are available to expatriates in Hong Kong.

In another legislative response, Lai tabulated the estimated number of classes and students in different types of special schools in the 2015-16 school year. According to the data, it is projected that 7,710 special needs students will attend special schools in Hong Kong in the 2015-16 school year, 67 more than the previous year.

In April 2015, Tran and her group of parents have launched two investigations: one against the Education Bureau and the other against a private international school. Both of these cases are advocating for setting up more English-medium instruction options to help non-Chinese speaking children with special needs.

“Based on the latest projection provided by relevant schools where applicable, it is projected that around 2,390 additional [international school] SEN places will be available between 2015/16 and 2017/18 school years,” Lai wrote.

“[The Education Bureau] plans to commission nongovernmental organizations, on a pilot basis, to organize work experience programs for the non-Chinese speaking students and students with specific learning difficulties over a three-year period as from the 2015-16 school year. \$16,563 have been earmarked for the pilot,” Lai wrote in a separate legislative response.

As Tran continues to wait with her daughter for a place in an appropriate school, Tran’s daughter will continue to attend a training center that provides special educational services. Tran plans to continue advocating with her group for more rights for special needs children who don’t speak Mandarin or Cantonese.

“As it is a basic need for the community to have doctors or even a fire station, adequate education for non-Chinese speaking students with special needs is needed as well. We are asking for education. English is one of the two official languages in Hong Kong and people should have access to English-medium instruction classrooms because it is considered a basic need,” she said.

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